

Faith Gambino Stenning
July 6, 1925 - October 15, 2014

"I have been in Sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and a sword in my hands."

- Zora Neale Hurston

Prelude: Pavan pour une infante defunte Maurice Ravel Bill Larson

Welcome and Opening Words: Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

S. Hall Young writes:

"Let me Die, working.

Still tackling plans unfinished, tasks undone!

Clean to its end,

swift may the race be run,

No laggard steps, no faltering, no shirking,

Let me die *working!*"

Let me die, thinking.

Let me fare forth still with an open mind,

Fresh secrets to unfold,

new truths to find,

My soul undimmed, alert, no question blinking;

Let me die, *thinking!*

Let me die, giving.

The substance of life for life's enriching;

Time, things, and self on heaven converging,

No selfish thought, loving, redeeming, living,

Let me die, *giving!*

Welcome. We have come together this morning to mourn our beloved Faith Gambino Stenning-- Mother, Raging Granny, diligent worker, impassioned and visionary activist, renowned harpist and admired teacher, opera fanatic, cherished sister and friend, and proud Yankee Sicilian.

A woman with a passion for her family, a woman of strong spirit and subtle humor, a refined but gritty lady endowed with grace and optimism, who spent much of her 89 earthly years working, thinking, giving, enriching, crusading, with a vitality that eluded her in her final days.

A woman who leaves behind something of her abiding presence, her joy and nobler self, something beyond all time, in each of us gathered together this morning.

And, while it is good to grieve, we gather also to lift up and express our gratitude for those deeper things about Faith that will never pass away or lose their vitality, but will remain an inspiration, and shall forevermore.

We stand with our present sorrow and with our glad memories of Faith in the presence of an impenetrable mystery. By our attendance here in this Sanctuary, we pay tribute to her and express our love and support for her family.

And so we have come together.
It is right and fitting that we have come together
Because we need each other
In empathy and consolation,
And because we need each other
In courage and wisdom:
To face Faith's death
To celebrate Faith's life

It is right and fitting that we have come together
Because a human life is sacred
In its being born
And also in its dying.

Let us deepen into our time together remembering this remarkable woman with a hymn that captures her zeal for justice-making.

Hymn: #121 : We'll Build a Land

(please rise in body or spirit, as you are able)

Reading: Poems and Haiku for Faith, Christine Dorean Michaels

Music to celebrate Faith's love of opera: "*O mio babbino caro*" Giacomo Puccini
Emily Pinkerton, Bill Larson

Tribute: Rev. Zucker

In February of 2013, Faith called and asked me to come over for a chat. I inquired, as I typically do, if she was ok and what she wanted to chat about specifically. "I want to talk about my memorial service," she said. "Are you dying?" I asked, somewhat alarmed. "No, not today," she replied with an implied grin. "But when I do kick-off, I want you to do the service and I want you to get it right." I laughed. Faith did not voice this request in a harsh way. On the contrary, it was just the type of direct, slightly salty and practical thing she was known for. So we made a date and I came over.

A kettle was heating up in her snug kitchen and she had laid out some baked treats in the cozy sunlit corner of her living room where she read and

rested and listened to her cherished classical music collection.

While the tea brewed, Faith took me on a tour of her home, each room, wall, and shelf telling the story of a woman who lived fully, intentionally, intelligently, passionately, spiritually, and with abundant humor and conviction.

Photographs of her sons, Ian and Blake shared space on the wall with artifacts and native art from travels to Africa and Mexico and bold modern posters from Pittsburgh rallies for racial justice; opera albums crammed the shelves next to stacked books about topics as varied as a biography of Puccini to a bestselling mystery to an instructional manual on growing tomatoes indoors. At her request, you will hear opera music today that Faith selected and tributes from her son and from her compatriot in racial justice, Mr. Tim Stevens.

In the music room, her harp sat in a ray of dappled light with a photo of Faith and her Harp Grove compatriots beaming from a nearby desk. A manila folder with the name of one of her voice student poked out of a file cabinet. They are also here this morning to honor and remember their friend and teacher in story and song.

On Faith's dining room table sat a caring get well card from a friend in this church's Women's Alliance and a flyer for an upcoming folk concert. The voices and hearts of the Folk Orchestra and the Alliance bless this service.

Faith's life was on display everywhere and I had already learned so much more about this remarkable woman than I had known before.

We settled in with our tea and treats. Faith took in a big breath and asked, "So, what do you want to know?" I laughed and said, "You invited me here, remember?" and then she laughed too. The former journalist and the minister in me kicked in, so I offered this: "Tell me your story." "Great!" she exclaimed – "I love a good open-ended question." (and, as an aside, couldn't we say that Faith's life was just that? An ever-evolving open ended question to answer?)

The story unfolds. Faith Gambino Stenning had an appropriately quirky start. She was born on July 6, 1925 while her parents were on vacation in Apponaug, Rhode Island. The family lived in Woonsocket, where her father, Thomas Albert Gambino sold or rented shoe repair machinery to cobblers. He had emigrated from Sicily with his three brothers to Birmingham, Alabama, but ended up in Rhode Island where he met Faith's mother, Mary Vincent Nichols, a homemaker.

Faith was a proud Sicilian who was equally impacted by the Protestant ethos of her maternal forebears who came to America from England in the 1600's and in Faith's words: "Were still fighting the good Yankee fight."

Faith grew up and came of age in Braintree, MA with her older sister Mary Elaine. As the youngest, she tired of being bossed around and instead of studying piano when she was supposed to, she ran around with her friends. She was, in her words, a non-stop singer around the house and lip-synched operas she had heard on the radio.

At Braintree High School, she was class secretary and an avid member of the performing troupe, appearing in Broadway style revues and Gilbert and

Sullivan light operas. One draw was the crush she had developed on the a guy one class ahead of her, but it never panned out. Alas – onward and upward.

In 1943, she entered Boston University, sang in the choir and received a Bachelors degree in Sociology. After college, Faith displayed her bravery and her burgeoning zeal for justice by traveling to Georgia to work for the anti-segregationist writer, Lillian Smith, whose book, “Strange Fruit” (a novel about interracial romance) had been banned in Boston.

Smith’s willingness to speak out to integrated audiences inspired Faith to develop her own public voice. Back in New England, she and Elaine formed a sister act - the Gambino Girls – just prior to the flowering of the American folk movement. They sang at women’s clubs and other venues around Boston, subtly sprinkling their repertoire with progressive messages. “Not sure the ladies got it, though,” Faith recalls.

Faith met her husband, Alan Hugh Stenning, in 1950., when he helped with the lighting for a show in Cambridge that she was performing in. He was a Fulbright scholar from Scotland, studying mechanical engineering at MIT. “No slouch there in the brains department,” she remarked. They married and in 1952, moved to Quebec City where he worked for the Canadian government.

While teaching at MIT in 1957, their first son, Ian David was born. Teaching gigs also took them to Florida and Bethlehem, PA, where Blake Hugh joined the family in 1964.

In 1973, the Stenning family settled in Pittsburgh and Faith was widowed soon after. She considered returning to Massachusetts, but Pittsburgh had gotten under her skin. She earned a Masters of Library Science fro Pitt in 1974, but, in her words, “the career had dried up.” So, resourceful Faith kept kith and kin together through luck, pluck and selling real estate.

During the 1970’s, which heralded a revival of harp music, Faith studied folk harp with Gretchen Van Husen and branded herself as “the happy harper,” playing weddings, receptions, and gallery openings. She co-founded Harp Grove of Western Pennsylvania and taught others the instrument. Eventually, though, in her words, “my hands wore out.”

Faith finally put some attention to her piano playing and fulfilled a childhood dream of teaching voice , as she did with students at Point Park University.

This church has been a core community for Faith since 1974. She found it immediately upon arriving in Pittsburgh, drawn to its progressiveness and openness and to the possibilities it offered for music, friendship, spiritual seeking, and social activism. “I have a passion for history and the human story,” she explained. “And I have always been appalled by racism.”

Not surpisingly, she applied that passion to her dedicated work towards racial justice here in Pittsburgh, whether it be in structured forums with elected officials, as co-chair of MORE (matters of racial equality) here at first church, or singing rousing protests songs with the Raging Grannies on street corners. Faith has rightfully earned the respect and admiration of fellow activists across racial

lines. And she was a valued member of our Folk Orchestra, cherished by her covenant group, the Spirit Seekers, and a friend to many. Look around. She was loved.

After several hours of conversation, the corner where we sat that February day was now shrouded in the quiet light of dusk with light snow dusting the trees in Highland Park. As I gathered my things to leave, Faith asked me if I had enough to go on. "Yes," I replied, " but if you want to get together again, just let me know. "

"Well, if I don't kick off before hand, let's do that." "But," she added, " I think you'll get it right."

Dear Faith - I hope we got it right. You surely did. Amen.

Remembrance from Faith's son: Blake Hugh Stenning

Music to honor Faith as a teacher and activist: *"A City Called Heaven"*
spiritual, arr. Hall Johnson, Ron Hutson, baritone

Tribute: Mr. Tim Stevens, Chairman, Black Political Empowerment Project

Offering (for the Social Justice Endowment)*: *Song for the Journey*
Dolan/Hinojosa, The First Unitarian Folk Orchestra

Reflection from "Spirit Seekers," Faith's covenant group: Pamela Alexander Blackwood

Pastoral Prayer:

Let us join our hearts together in the name of that which we each hold sacred:

O Mysterious presence,
Spirit of Life and Love that moves around us
In our joy and sorrow
Make us brave for this life.
Oh braver than this,
Let us straighten after pain
As the tree straightens after the rain
Shining and lovely again.

Spirit of Life,
Make us brave for grief.
Much braver than this,
As the blown grass lifts, let me rise
From sorrow with quiet eyes
And a heart healed broken.

Radiant light.
Make us brave for love.
Life brings such blinding things.
Help us keep our inner sight
Help us see aright
That out of the dark comes light.
Blessed Be.

Silent Reflection

We pause now to gather our individual feelings and thoughts, meditate upon the meaning of this occasion, and say our private farewells to Faith
In silence we enter into this time of personal memory and reflection.

Hymn: Spirit of Life (please remain seated)

(include words)

“The Perfect Heart,” a “Harp tale” told by Barra the Bard

A musical tribute from three members of Harp Grove of Western PA (co-founded in 1997 by Faith, Joyce Emery and Barra, as an ISFHC chapter).
Three Celtic tunes: Linda McNair, Mike Frazier, Barra.

Open Sharing from the congregation

Benediction: Rev. Zucker

Oh, may I join the choir invisible, writes George Eliot,
Of those immortal dead that live again
In minds made better by their presence:
live in pulses stirred to generosity,
In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn
For miserable aims that end with self,
In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars
And with their mild persistence
urge our search to vaster issues.
So to live is heaven:
To make undying music in the world.

The dead are not dead if we have loved them truly. And by loving and honoring Faith in death, the best of her will flow into us, challenge us, inspire us to love, to live, to laugh and to dream.

Faith, may you join the choir invisible to make undying music in the world. We will ever be cheered and inspired by your voice on the wind.

Rest in the great peace with an untroubled mind and a happy heart.

Let us all say, "Amen"

Tribute from Edith Bell and a rousing send off from "The Raging Grannies" singing their signature song.

Interment:

Interment of ashes – Faith Stenning

We have come together in this memorial garden to part with the earthly form of our beloved Faith Gambino Stenning.

In a world where our most precious goods are perishable, let us honor, respect, and dignify Faith's exuberant life through our own eagerness to be resilient, creative and playful, to practice kindness, to foster joy and justice, to trust love, to learn, teach, to stir things up but "do no harm." To connect deeply with our friends and family as we go back to our daily rounds.

For as much as the spirit of our beloved dwells no more in mortal form, we commit her remains to the earth in the sure knowledge that whatever else may die, her nobler self and her spirit find immortality in our lives, and thus her influence for good shall last as long as time.

Life giveth and life taketh away. Blessed be the spirit of life.

INTERMENT OF ASHES (Ian and Blake)

"Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, the spirit returns to the Earth. "

Let us join now for a moment of silence to hold Faith and one another in our minds and our hearts.

In the words of poet May Sarton:

Now voyager, lay here your dazzled head.
Come back to earth from air, be nourished,
Not with that light on light, but with their bread.

Here close to earth be cherished, mortal heart,
Hold your way deep as roots push rocks apart
To bring the spurt of green up from the dark.

Where music thundered let the mind be still,
Where the will triumphed let there be no will,
What light revealed, now let the dark fulfill.

Here close to earth the deeper pulse is stirred,
Here where no wings rush and no sudden bird,
But only heart-beat upon beat is heard.

Here let the fiery burden be all spilled,
The passionate voice at last be calmed and stilled
And the long yearning of the blood fulfilled.

Now voyager, come home, come home to rest,
Here on the long-lost country of earth's breast
Lay down the fiery vision, and be blest, be blest.

Now voyager, Faith Gambino Stenning, rest in the great peace and be blest, be blest.

Let us all say, "Amen."

All are welcome for a memorial reception following the service downstairs in the Undercroft Gallery.

